

even *short stories*... all little more than sources of programming forming, feeding, and reproducing a nation, a world, of mindless slaves. *Controlbots*, that's what I called them. In order to fully comprehend an aspect of reality that popular culture denies, you've got to create your own language. Reality is so well hidden that we can't even speak of it, because they created the languages, leaving out any words which could threaten their power.

The ancient Greeks had a concept for those mass produced robots, though. The Muses themselves called them the *merest bellies*. The *merest bellies* do nothing but consume cultural programming. The average, man, woman, and child in any civilized nation is little more than a walking robotic slave who feeds on cultural programming as if it were as essential to mental health as regular food is to physical health. It would be bad enough if these *bellies* were simply mindless automata; but, you see, the problem is they seek to infect the uninfected, people like me, because they know we are a threat. And once infected, there's no going back. Kira would drag me down into that nightmarish state of mind worse than any Hades or hell. She wanted to drag me down into the realm of the *controlbots*. I wanted to hurt her as she was trying to hurt me.

Even now, I thought, my lips curling with disgust, when I had paid for her entire trip out of my own pocket, flown her halfway across the world to see sights most people never get to see, even now she was trying to pull me down. But as usual, I checked my emotions, (or was it that my emotions checked me?) and returned to my sketch.

When Kira noted my pencil sweeping across the twenty-four by sixteen inch canvas, she sighed and dropped into a weatherproof plastic chair.

I considered myself a painter in the tradition of the surrealists as each of my paintings was a merging of the subjective and objective world. Like an arcane alchemist, I would mix my test tubes filled with chemical color and attempt to capture the perfect shade of gold on canvas. It did not take long for that first subjective gold to begin to materialize out of my seemingly chaotic scribbles. As the dark outlines solidified into formal and

impassible boundaries, I saw it; a stairway, hugging the side of the mountain. The stairs cracked and blended into the mountain, climbing gradually towards the summit. Some presence seemed to take control of my hand, forcing it to draw of its own accord. I watched with detached awe as I drew, without any conscious intent, nine vague female figures, cloaked from head to toe in hooded robes, climbing those same stairs. I had been sketching with such rapidity that when I finished my hand was trembling due to exertion.

I angled the canvas under the reflected sunlight. After a few moments of close examination, I allowed a grin to trace the corners of my lips. It was a keeper. The hard part was done. I would not leave Greece empty handed.

Kira rose from her chair. "Shall we go?"

She was already stepping down the stairs leading from the balcony to the grass. Despite my obvious fascination with the work I had just completed, she had barely even allowed it a glance.

Five miles I lugged my sketchbook, pencils, and tote bag from the hotel to the foot of the mountain. My story might well have ended at this point, had Kira not been so keen on observing the local topography. At the foot of the mountain, she discovered the remnants of an ancient path, or stairway, leading up the side of the mountain. Needless to say, we were all astounded, Kira perhaps even more so than me. She knew full well, as did I, that there was absolutely no way I could have seen that path from our hotel. The painting. The stairs. Was it possible?

"This could be stairs, or a path." She shook her head. "It's hard to tell."

"There... there... and up there," she pointed out numerous rock formations. "That's the side of the path... must have been a barricade, to keep people from falling. But that second one, that's got to be a corner, where the path turned, ascending at an angle."

Though I didn't know exactly what she was talking about, I was growing excited, for I could see, to a fashion, how the path, or stairs, wound up from the mountainside, just like in my painting. Two